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SUBJECT: THE SYRIA/LEBANON SIDESHOW LARGEPLY UPSTAGES THE
MAIN EVENT AT THE JULY 13-14 PARIS SUMMIT ON THE
MEDITERRANEAN

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Kathleen Allegrone for reas
ons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The GOF is pleased with what it considers to have been a major diplomatic triumph by using Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's participation in the recent Paris summit on the Mediterranean to achieve a public commitment from the Lebanese and Syrian presidents to normalize relations. Our contacts at the French presidency and MFA have further expressed delight that France is a "player" once again in Middle East peace negotiations and is positioned to play a possible co-sponsor role, purportedly at Syria's request, in any resumed direct talks between Syria and Israel. Elysee NEA adviser Boris Boillon, however, was angry about what he claimed was distorted U.S. media reporting echoing the line that Paris had sacrificed or "sold out" an independent Lebanon for the sake of a better relationship with Damascus, including via some sort of deal on the Special Tribunal. He and French MFA DAS-equivalent Ludovic Pouille underscored the historical centrality of a viable and independent Lebanon to French policy and credibility in the Middle East; the reason for working with Syria is to help Lebanon, not a goal in itself. According to Boillon, Sarkozy asked Asad to intercede with the Iranians on the nuclear issue and pressure Hamas to release the French/Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Asad resisted Sarkozy's request for some sort of gestures on human rights that might appear to have been taken under western pressure but agreed to consider an Arab-led process. Boillon confirmed that Syrian Deputy PM Dardari will visit Paris July 21-22 (primarily to reestablish contacts with French businesses), while French FM Kouchner will visit Damascus toward the end of August. He claimed that the mid-September timeframe for a Sarkozy visit to Damascus was in response to a Syrian request for an early "deliverable." Like everything in the Franco-Syrian relationship, Boillon claimed, the final decision on going ahead with the visit will be taken based on the Elysee's assessment of whether the Syrians are living up to their word on Lebanon. Boillon had little to add regarding the Syrian/Lebanese/French/Qatari meeting except to note the excellent dynamic between Asad and Lebanese President Sleiman. Sarkozy's meeting with Sleiman solidified the favorable personal impression Sarkozy has of the Lebanese president, although the Elysee was disappointed with Sleiman's repeated emphasis on the limits of his actual power. End summary

¶2. (C) French presidency NEA adviser Boris Boillon spoke at some length with us July 15 about what the GOF considers to have been Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's highly successful visit to Paris to take part in the summit on the Mediterranean. According to Boillon, the French feel they made considerable progress across the board but especially with respect to Lebanon. French President Sarkozy and Syrian President Asad had a long tte--tte July 12 focused heavily

on the establishment of normal relations between Syria and Lebanon. Boillon said that Sarkozy conditioned his mid-September visit on Syria and Lebanon making real progress. The Syrians did not like this conditionality, but the French insisted.

¶3. (C) We probed on the timing for Sarkozy's visit to Damascus, which had struck some USG officials as premature since it seemed to constitute a reward to Asad for vague promises made without having actually followed through. It was also much sooner than the "by the end of the year" timeframe that Boillon had previously specified. Boillon explained that Sarkozy agreed to the Syrian-proposed timeframe of a mid-September visit to Damascus to give the Syrians a "deliverable." This was very much in the dynamic of the Syrians pressing for progress on the bilateral track while the French pressed on the Syria/Lebanon track. Boillon stressed, in that context, that the visit was not a sure thing, and the Syrians needed to make good faith progress in terms of redefining their bilateral relationship with Lebanon or it will not happen.

¶4. (C) Boillon went on at great length about how critical Lebanon and its success as an independent nation state was to France's position in the Middle East. Indeed, he declared at one point that "the key to French policy in the region is Lebanon." It bothered him and others in the Elysee, therefore, to read articles in the U.S. press arguing that Paris had "sold" Lebanon to the Syrians for the sake of a better relationship with Damascus. He argued that, were this true, it would make a mockery of everything France has done since 1943 in terms of separating Lebanon from "greater

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Syria" and trying to make it a viable state. "Lebanon is our baby, and we do not want it to disappear," Boillon continued. "This is a constant element of French policy no matter who is president."

¶5. (C) More specifically, Boillon said he was keen to speak to us in part because the critical articles in the U.S. press had replayed accusations out of Lebanon and perhaps Saudi Arabia that France had cooked up a deal with Syria to neutralize the UNIIC and Special Tribunal. Boillon's anger was particularly strong over interpretations of French presidency diplomatic adviser Levitte's unattributed remark that compromise over the Tribunal was a "non-starter" as wrongly implying that the Tribunal itself was irrelevant or never to happen. (Comment: We asked Boillon for citations of these specific articles. He has sent, and we forwarded to NEA and EUR, a handful of articles from UK papers or written by people unlikely to have caused much or an impact among U.S. opinion-makers. We will point this out to him. End comment) Boillon repeated his previous refutation of these charges. Sarkozy raised the issue, but only in passing, with Asad. His principal theme was that France supported establishing the Tribunal as soon as feasible and counted on it operating independently, i.e., on the basis of conducting its "legal" function in a "depoliticized" manner. Asad reportedly had no substantive response. (Comment: In an interview on France 2 television, Asad was asked what Syria would do if the Tribunal accused a Syrian official of involvement in former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri's assassination or that of any other Lebanese whose deaths are under investigation. Asad hesitated briefly but, after underscoring the hypothetical nature of the question since he believed no Syrians had been involved, said any officials so named would be tried in Syria. End comment)

¶6. (C) Boillon noted the ongoing French insistence on demarcating the Syrian/Lebanese border but said France did not expect immediate action in this respect. It would be unrealistic, he went on, this early in the term of the new Lebanese government and before other basic steps had been taken (e.g., exchange of senior-level visits between Beirut and Damascus, opening of embassies). Neither the Syrians nor

the Israelis are prepared to resolve the Golan or subsidiary issues like Shab'a Farm (see below and septel) France, therefore, would not include action on the borders as a prerequisite for a Sarkozy visit. Instead, Paris will be looking to see progress along the lines the Syrian and Lebanese presidents have agreed: a visit to Beirut by Syrian FM Mu'allim in the coming weeks, followed by Lebanese President Sleiman's visit to Damascus, and an announcement that the two countries will open embassies and appoint ambassadors. Harking back to NEA A/S Welch's last discussions in Paris, Boillon assured us that France shares our concerns about the future state of Lebanese/Syrian ties, including the fate of bilateral trade accords that currently give favorable treatment to Lebanon.

¶7. (C) Boillon further highlighted the following points from the Sarkozy/Asad conversation:

--On talks between Syria and Israel, Boillon claimed the Syrians proposed French co-sponsorship of eventual direct talks after a new U.S. administration takes office. The model/precedent for this would be the Israel/Lebanon Monitoring Group established in 1996, which France and the U.S. co-chaired. Boillon indicated that France said it was prepared to play such a role, although he told us that it would not be at the expense of or in place of the primary role in peace talks played by the U.S. When we asked what Israel's reaction to this had been, Boillon claimed that there had been no real Israeli reaction during the summit. The Israelis, he continued, see the resumption of direct talks with Syria as unlikely for months yet and will focus on how to structure them then.

--Boillon said that Sarkozy asked Asad to encourage the Lebanese to open an indirect dialogue with Israel. Asad's response was a non-committal "why not?" In a separate meeting with Lebanese President Sleiman, however, Sarkozy's encouragement of such a dialogue was met by Sleiman immediately "raising his umbrella" to deflect the whole idea.

(Comment: See below for further characterization of what the Elysee judged as Sleiman's hyper-caution throughout. End comment)

--On Iran, Sarkozy asked Asad to pass a message about the seriousness of French concerns about Iran's nuclear program.

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Asad agreed to deliver the message, Boillon related, but was prudent. He called the Iranians Syria's "close friends" and would not, therefore, place that relationship in jeopardy.

--Sarkozy spoke frankly to Asad about human rights, arguing that it was in Syria's overall interests to improve the situation. Boillon reported that Asad was somewhat receptive, but Asad asserted he cannot appear to give in to western pressure. The two presidents discussed another mechanism involving Arab leaders (notably the Amir of Qatar) to handle this delicate matter.

--Sarkozy asked for Asad's help to pressure Hamas leader Khalid Mash'al to obtain the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit (a dual national). Asad was sympathetic but said he would discuss how best to handle this with Egyptian President Mubarak. (Comment: In light of Sarkozy's public mention of the Shalit case as the next French priority for a hostage release after the liberation of Franco-Colombian Ingrid Betancourt, we asked Boillon whether France might now reconsider its firm policy against dealing with Hamas. Boillon was mostly firm in reaffirming France's determination not to deal with Hamas until that group had satisfied established international conditions for doing so, but he did not entirely rule it out if the situation changed enough that France saw an opportunity to get Shalit released. Clearly, Sarkozy's statement cast a different light on this issue. End comment)

¶8. (C) Boillon confirmed the sequence of events, per a number of media reports, for the coming weeks between France and Syria: Syrian Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Dardari will visit Paris July 21-22, followed by a late August visit to Damascus by French Foreign Minister Kouchner.

Boillon was somewhat dismissive of Dardari's visit, which he said the Syrians insisted on and which was intended to renew ties to French business interests. He speculated that Dardari may meet, for example, with EADS executives to discuss possible Airbus sales (something we pointed out as problematic, given the U.S.-origin content of more sensitive components in most Airbus aircraft). Boillon emphasized that Dardari's visit in no way constituted a benchmark that the French would use to measure Syrian conduct nor was it intended to come up with economic or commercial deliverables for the Sarkozy visit. The visit to Damascus, Boillon maintained, would be first and foremost a political occasion.

¶9. (C) Boillon talked a bit about Sarkozy's separate meeting with Sleiman, whom Boillon described as a "nice man," a serious leader fully engaged for the sake of his country, but "afraid of everything" and quick to emphasize the limits of his actual power under the Lebanese constitution. Sarkozy nonetheless appreciated Sleiman's frankness and "availability." Despite Sleiman's self-described limitations as a national leader (who must defer to the prime minister as head of government), Boillon indicated the Elysee believes it can rely on Sleiman as a good faith arbiter of the national interest. Sleiman's substantive message to Sarkozy was that Lebanon could not afford conflict with Syria and that Beirut had to work constructively with Damascus. Boillon observed that the Elysee saw evidence of the good personal relationship between the Syrian and Lebanese leaders during their meeting with Sarkozy and the Amir of Qatar (which substantively covered nothing beyond what was indicated in the resultant communique). Sleiman thanked Sarkozy for France's contribution to UNIFIL and was the only person to raise the subject of the disputed Shab'a Farms (see septel). Sarkozy offered no response on Shab'a Farms but restated French commitment to help Lebanon economically and militarily.

¶10. (C) DAS-equivalent for the Levant Ludovic Pouille, later on July 15, deferred to the Elysee for a substantive readout of the meetings but provided a slightly more nuanced or complete context for French policy toward Syria and Lebanon. As Boillon had done, Pouille crowed that the Middle East-related activities on the margins of the summit but particularly those related to Syria and Lebanon marked France's return to the forefront of Middle East diplomatic activity. Pouille reflected the more forward-leaning rhetoric of the French MFA with respect to how much more of a role France was willing or expected to play in the various aspects of the peace process, including the Syrian/Israeli track. He did, however, indicate that the Elysee alone is driving the policy vis-a-vis Syria and would make whatever call was necessary on proceeding with Sarkozy's mid-September trip to Damascus.

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¶11. (C) Pouille was probably, however, more dismissive than Boillon of USG concerns about the timing and whether France was moving too quickly with Syria in a way that seemed to be rewarding it unduly. Without denying Syria's capacity to cause further trouble in Lebanon, he pointed to Mu'allim's presence in Beirut at Sleiman's inauguration as the first meaningful signal of a positive change in Syria's position on having a more normal relationship with Lebanon. Despite whatever good personal dynamic the Elysee may have observed between the Syrian and Lebanese leaders, Pouille recalled that Syria seemed to have had genuine reservations about agreeing to Sleiman's election late last year and earlier this year.

¶12. (C) Pouille echoed some of Boillon's sentiment in terms of the high stakes for France should Lebanon not succeed in

its quest for a more normal and equal relationship with Syria. In addition, he ticked off the many challenges ahead in terms of implementing the Doha accord. Chief among these would be passing the electoral reform law in time to implement them before parliamentary elections in 2009. The next thing in Lebanon the GOF was waiting for was the statement by the newly formed government of its program for the coming months. Once this was announced, the press would be on for Damascus and Beirut to flesh out their normal relationship. Pouille said that France would watch closely to ensure that this relationship did not disadvantage Lebanon. The French embassy in Damascus would soon contact the Lebanese representative to the bilateral committee governing Syrian/Lebanese relations to get his assessment of this situation.

¶13. (C) Comment: As noted in previous reporting -- Paris Points and cables) Assad's visit was highly controversial inside France and there was considerable anxiety within the GOF as to whether the key Syria/Lebanon part of the summit diplomacy would be a success. Boillon and Pouille in our latest meetings recalled the nail-biting telephone diplomacy that went into cajoling the Lebanese and the Syrians to ensure that a new Lebanese government was in place beforehand. Boillon was blunt in telling us that the GOF still has a huge problem with the Saudis over King Abdallah's perception of Assad's reception here, despite previously reported indications that the French had calmed him down somewhat. He told us he would craft another message from Sarkozy to Abdallah on the subject before July 18.

¶14. (C) Comment continued: The French continue to tell us that they have no illusions and are moving ahead with the Syrians with their eyes wide open. According to Boillon, Sarkozy's message to Assad was blunt (or "brutale," in French): "We will be straight with you as long as you are straight with us. If you are not straight with us, we will not be straight with you either." We believe the French in general, and Sarkozy in particular, recall all too well Syrian deceit at the end of the year over Lebanon. However, Sarkozy, who relishes the high stakes gamble in the hope of getting the high-stakes payout, is prepared to risk his so far remarkably good luck once more with Damascus to consolidate France's new position as a key player in the Middle East. Although we had little indication from Boillon that much of what has transpired was coordinated ahead of time with Washington, Pouille could not believe that NSA Hadley and Levitte had not discussed Sarkozy's intentions vis-a-vis Asad ahead of the summit. Indeed, Sarkozy is said to have told the council of ministers that the summit would not have been as well attended, nor as successful, had it not been for U.S. support for it and for Sarkozy. Minister of Immigration, and Sarkozy confidant, Brice Hortefeux told ambassador Stapleton that Sarkozy tossed off at a council meeting that followed the summit, "If the U.S. hadn't supported it, half those heads of state wouldn't have come" -- Sarkozy's way of reminding his ministers that U.S. support for French policy initiatives is part of the payoff of Sarkozy having healed bilateral relations. End comment

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